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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by examining the changes that have occurred in school superintendency during the last 30 years, making it more collaborative and less conducive to the emergence of strong and dynamic "giants" such as Ben Willis and Harold Spears. These changes derive from changes in the general society, including a loss of confidence in government at all levels, increased activism on school boards, increased parental influence, increased power of teachers, decline in test scores leading to a loss in prestige of educational leaders, and declining enrollment. Following this discussion, 12 superintendents from large school districts, 9 from medium-sized districts, and 2 from county systems are named and briefly described as role models for the modern superintendency. They differ widely from one another, but all have high energy levels, strong intellects, and a deep commitment to education. (TE)

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ARE THERE GIANTS AMONG OUR EDUCATIONAL MOUNTAINS?

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ARE THERE GIANTS AMONG OUR EDUCATIONAL MOUNTAINS?

M. Donald Thomas[1]

It was only a small group - six of us. We had worked all day. We were tired, maybe even discouraged. Being in a hotel in Washington, D. C., was not uncommon for us. What was different was the topic we were discussing. It began when someone asked: "Who are the current heroes in the superintendency? Who are the Ben Willises and Harold Spears of our time?"

The debate continued past midnight - there was more work to do in the morning. Then someone suggested that an article be written on this subject. At that time no one was too eager to write about anything.

Two weeks later the questions were still in my mind - Who are the stars? Where are the giants among our educational mountains? A story began to form.

As a young administrator in Illinois I was in awe of Big Ben Willis. He not only ran the Chicago Public Schools, he also seemed to be able to do everything - direct the mayor, extract promises from the business community, influence teacher training, motivate legislators, write for publication, consult with other states, and dominate educational associations. I often thought that if he were asked to walk across Lake Michigan, he certainly could do so.

I met Harold Spears at a luncheon in St. Louis. He was sensitive, almost apologetic about what he was doing. Curriculum and instruction were his cup-of-tea. He stood out like a larger-than-life individual with interests as magnificent as the Rocky Mountains. He was more than a superintendent. He was a philosopher, a financier, a writer, a critic of the American society.

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Both Ben and Harold served as mentors for many of us. They were powerful men who appeared at conventions, controlled the direction of education, and set a model for other superintendents to follow. Willis once said to me: "If you're going to have an idea - it might as well be a big one." Ten days before he died, I received a letter from Harold Spears. He urged me to remain positive about public schools and never to forget that education makes possible the American dream. His philosophy was clear and mountain water pure.

In the 1940's and 1950's big, big individuals occupied the office of superintendent in most large cities of this nation. From San Francisco to New York, from Chicago to New Orleans, the superintendents led, controlled, built school systems, and took care of their people. They appeared more powerful, more articulate, more politically influential than superintendents do today. The giants among our educational mountains began to retire in the sixties and seventies and were seen no more - except that they are still in the memories of those of us who were fortunate enough to know them and to appreciate their leadership.

Today the stars don't seem to stand out as larger-than-life figures. Nevertheless, they are there - doing a magnificent job for public schools. And they can be found in large and small districts; in urban and rural areas; in rich and poor school districts.

Something happened on the way to the 1980's. It happened in the school business the same way it happened in politics - power was increasingly diffused more among the people and not concentrated as much in leaders. As there are no longer any big-city bosses, so there are no more all-powerful superintendents of schools. Today school governance is more collaborative than it used to be, more subtle than in former days. Then too, superintendents rarely stay in one district long enough to build a strong, comprehensive power base.

Changes in the general society reduced the possible overpowering influence of most offices, particularly the superintendency:

1. People no longer had great confidence in any level of government - local or national.
2. Board membership changed. Activists who were elected to school boards had less trust in the professionals than former board members.
3. Parents were better educated and wanted part of the action. The father image of superintendents was no longer sufficient.
4. Teacher power increased, thereby reducing the power of school administrators.
5. The general decline in test scores tarnished the image of educational leaders.
6. Declining enrollment and an aging population presented different problems than those which most school administrators had been educated to solve.

Thus, it became more difficult for anyone to stand out above the crowd. Most superintendents were trying to survive in their own school districts.

If there are no giants out there; there must, at least, be some mighty men and women who are the exemplars. There certainly are some. You bet!

Here are some of the biggies: Billy Reagan in Houston; Alonzo Crim, Atlanta; Robert Alioto, San Francisco; Herb Sang, Duval County, Jacksonville, Florida; Jim Melvin, Lee County, Fort Myers, Florida; Robert Spillane, Fairfax County, Fairfax, Virginia; Linus Wright, Dallas, Texas; Tom Payzant, San Diego, California; and Lee McMurrin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Lest you think all the big ones are men, we have Joan Raymond in Yonkers, New York; Lillian Barna in Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Floretta McKenzie in Washington, D.C.

These twelve superintendents are extremely able, dedicated, and powerful.

- Billy Reagan is an innovator. His courage and energy match the vitality of Houston. He has done much to improve education for all children and to build confidence in public schools. When Billy Reagan speaks, others listen.
- Alonzo Crim is an engineer. He has slowly rebuilt the Atlanta schools into a respected educational system. Systematically, he works with the larger community to obtain resources and build support. What Alonzo Crim believes in he accomplishes.
- Robert Alioto has struggled long and hard to bring stability to a troubled San Francisco school system. It is now one of the best in the nation. It has taken energy, courage, leadership, and imagination. Alioto has all of these qualities.
- Herb Sang is an evangelist. He preaches education from Florida to California. He has improved academic achievement, increased attendance, and made intellectual efforts respectable in Duval County. While at times controversial; he is, nevertheless, always on the side of boys and girls. When he speaks, we wish we could speak as well.
- Jim Melvin is a man for all seasons. He is a gentleman, a firm leader, and a great motivator. Wherever he has been, schools have improved. He is respected by his colleagues, by teachers, and by the community. While not as well known as some of the others, he is one of the best. When Jim Melvin speaks no one has any doubt that what he wants to do will get done.
- Robert Spillane is an intellectual. He is well read, incisive, courageous, and direct. He performed a near miracle in Boston, working with a federal judge and making the Boston schools

respectable after several years of chaos. Bob speaks from conviction and commitment.

- Linus Wright is a tower of strength. He has directed a tough Dallas school system and has made it work. Few big cities work as well. Linus has integrity, scholarship, and a burning desire to improve schools in Dallas. Wright is a premier expert on school finance and has the ability to work well with all segments of the community. His influence is felt throughout Texas and at the national level as well.
- Tom Payzant is an intense person who has a mission to achieve. He plans well, speaks forcefully, and commands attention. His imprint is found in Oregan, in Oklahoma, and now in San Diego. He has learned the secret of working well with the Board of Education. Good things happen wherever he serves as superintendent.
- Lee McMurrin has contributed a great deal to the Milwaukee Public School System. His RISE program is one of the nation's very best. Milwaukee has clearly demonstrated that all children can learn, regardless of socio-economic status. McMurrin's views are valued by his colleagues and by education associations.
- Joan Raymond is a fighter. During the past several years she has managed a series of almost unbelievable crises and still managed to totally revamp the Yonkers public school system, both administratively and instructionally. She is a formidable opponent of political and special interest pressures because she is intelligent as well as practical. Tough-minded, sensitive, intense, and purposeful, she is a true professional and is respected nationally for her talent.

- Lillian Barna is tough. She worked through an impossible situation in San Jose, California, and gave direction to one of the most troubled districts in the nation. She is bright, a student of history, and a firm believer in educational equity for all students. When Lillian Barna speaks, her words encourage and give reality to the dreams and hopes of many.
- Floretta McKenzie has worked wonders in Washington, D. C. She has forged a strong partnership with the business community and has brought stability to an often troubled school district. Today Washington, D. C., is on its way to becoming a good school system once again.

In addition, some of the really good superintendents are in smaller school districts. Much of the leadership has come from mid-size school districts - cities of 100-300,000 or less. Superintendents in this category may not be giants, but are national figures who have influenced educational practice.

- Rudy Gatti knows how to close schools better than anyone else in the nation. He has led the Santa Clara Unified School District, Santa Clara, California, for 10 years and has transformed a declining school district into a superb school system.
- Bob Fortenberry, Jackson, Mississippi, is the exemplar in desegregation and school management. The Jackson schools believe that all children can learn and they do so - better than in similar school systems.
- In Tulsa, Oklahoma, Larry Zenke has become powerful by sharing power with teachers and citizens. He is ahead of everyone else in establishing cooperative systems of governance. At the same time,

good things have happened - higher achievement, lower absenteeism, stronger public confidence, extended business and community support.

- If there is a superintendent's superintendent, it is Jack Davidson in Tyler, Texas. He has integrity, intelligence, sensitivity, and a deep commitment to quality education for all students. What best describes Jack is "character." He has more of it than can be reasonably expected from anyone.
- Olin Adams, in Carroll County, Westminster, Maryland, is a great teacher. He leads by teaching. He is a master at motivating his colleagues and achieving objectives. Olin knows what needs to be done and permits others to do it.
- Joan Abrams is a visionary. She wants for women the same opportunities that men have had. She has influenced the AASA and speaks out forcefully on educational issues. In addition, Joan has established Red Bank, New Jersey, as an exemplar district in school-based management, in student achievement, and in school/community partnerships. She is articulate, able, and full of energy.
- June Gabler is a solid bread and butter superintendent. In Fort Dodge, Iowa, she has strengthened the curricula, improved achievement levels, and increased financial support for schools. June has cracked the entrance to AASA leadership and wants to be the first woman president of AASA. When she speaks, men listen.
- Gordon McAndrew, Richland One, Columbia, South Carolina, is politically smart. He is also an innovator. He has taken a so-so district and made it one of the best. His ideas have been written into state law and his influence is felt throughout South Carolina. When Gordon speaks, I listen.

- The gentle giant of the superintendency is Charles Fowler in Fairfield, Connecticut. He is good at many things: closing schools, building public support, curriculum, leadership, administrative organization, and legislation. He also speaks effectively, writes well, and conducts the business of professional organizations. He is both a technician and an artist.

In the intermediate units (county school systems) two exemplars are Tom Goodman in Santa Clara, California, County; and Don Kenny in Riverside, California, County. Tom is probably more visible than Don, but none is more effective than Don Kenny. Both are men of quality, integrity, and influence.

- Don Kenny is one of the most able superintendents in the nation. He is respected and admired by everyone in Riverside County. He leads by giving people responsibility and freedom. People who work with him grow in their jobs. Don has established model special education programs and outstanding inservice programs -some things for which he would never take credit.
- Tom Goodman is just that - a good man. He looks and acts like a superintendent. He is intelligent, personable, and committed to quality education. He is new to Santa Clara County but not to California. He will influence education for many years to come and schools will be better for what he does.

There you have it - 12 biggies, nine near biggies, and two stars in county systems. They are the giants among our educational mountains. They are the men and women who have replaced the Ben Willises and Harold Spears. They are the educational heroes of our young people who aspire to become superintendents of schools.

As we examine these 23 men and women, we find that they are as different from each other as Ben Willis was different from Harold Spears. Some are technicians, some evangelists, and others motivators. All, however, seem to have tremendous energy levels, strong intellects, and a deep commitment to education. They also seem to enjoy their work, speak well of their profession, and appreciate being a superintendent of schools.

What has happened is that leadership is more situational than general. Superintendents succeed in a particular place, under specific circumstances, and are not leaders in all situations. Like Lee Iacocca, who was fired at Ford, only to succeed at Chrysler; several of those mentioned had diffiuclties in one district and great success in another. Like Iacocca, they welcome challenge, take risks, and rely heavily on their own strengths and convictions.

Someone else's list may differ from my list. The message, however, would probably be the same. Superintendents of great power belonged to a former era. The world has changed. Power is no longer concentrated in an office, it is now more evenly distributed. But education still has its heroes, it still has stars for us to emulate. The stars may not shine as brightly, but they shine, nevertheless. And there are still mighty men and women on the educational landscape. I am fortunate to have known some of them. But more fortunate are our children and our nation; because of their superb leadership, our schools are in good hands.